

Challenges in Predicting Child Outcomes from Different Family Structures: A Further Note



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Abstract

Although professional social science organizations have ethical standards by which authors should allow independent assessment of their data, many authors refuse to release their data, leaving other scholars with few options with respect to checking published results. Such authors may realize that when some authors have released their data to other scholars, mistakes have been found and key findings have been overturned. Thus, it may appear to be safer to not release data for independent analysis. Under such conditions, what can other scholars do? Here an approach suggested by Schumm [1] is re-examined as one example of how to use algebra to independently assess data that authors have refused to release. Although release of data is far more preferable, scholars should not just give up but should do what can be done to figure out as many of the secrets behind the mask as possible. While research with complex families may be more challenging methodologically, such families need the benefits that such research can provide for helping them navigate their own complexities and unique stressors.

Keywords: Social science; Critiques; Same-sex parents; Lesbian family; Heterosexual family; Parenting; Intervening factors; Stressors

Background

Hull [2] has highlighted the importance of social science research in resolving legal disputes about the effects of different family structures. Yet, assessing the impact of family structure on child outcomes is easier said than done. Schumm [1] discussed many of the challenges involved in predicting children's outcomes from having lived or currently living in different family structures. One of many challenges was that some children may be born into one type of family and later transition into other types of families. As noted in Schumm [1] some have argued that if a child is born into a heterosexual family and later one or both of the parents come out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, creating a new family structure, then no conclusions should be drawn "about the effect of being raised by same-sex parents". This situation, for example, led to intense criticism of the study by Regnerus [3-5] by numerous scholars, in part because his data included very few stable same-sex couples who had lived with the focal child from birth to age 18. His results indicated that children from families that had been involved in some way with a same-sex parent at some point before the focal child turned 19 had more adverse adult outcomes on some variables. This led to intense criticism from a wide range of many scholars as it was seen as taking an anti-progressive political position [6]. Schumm [1] listed 16 critical sources (Amato [7], Anderson [8]; Barrett [9]; Becker &

Todd [10]; Eggebeen [11]; Gates, et al. [12]; Goldberg, Kashy, & Smith [13]; Massey [14]; Moore & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer [15]; Osborne [16]; Perrin, Cohen, & Caren [17]; Redding [18]; Reiss [19]; Schumm [20]; Sherkat [21]; Siegel, et al. [22]). Since then, numerous other critiques have been published [2,6,23-35,48-49]. Some of the critiques were harsh. One title of these critiques was "The Regnerus study - fact or fiction?" [27]; another article described the Regnerus study as a "fraudulent work" (Rich, 2016, p. 267). One author stated that Regnerus's study suggested "negative adoption outcomes for gay couples" ([34],p. 534), even though his study did not focus on adopted children nor did it state that same-sex parents should not be allowed to adopt children.

However, families are complex and can change structures over time, a situation that should be taken into account. A child might have been born into a lesbian family that later transitioned into a heterosexual marriage. A child might have been born into a heterosexual relationship, transitioned into a lesbian two-parent family, and then transitioned into a single parent lesbian family structure. In others words, knowing a child's current family structure without knowing their past experiences of different family structures will complicate any scholar's efforts to understand the impact, if any, of many different family structures.

Objectives

Golombok et al. [36], in their study of child outcomes of lesbian mothers, reported that of their 39 lesbian-headed families, 28 had a child who had been born into a heterosexual relationship where the mother later identified as a lesbian while still raising the child (also see Perry et al. [37] and Stevens et al. [38]). The average age of the child when the mother transitioned was 4.1 years (49 months) with a range of 0 to 108 months. Using a variety of methods, Schumm [1] estimated that of the 28 families into which a child had been born into a heterosexual family but whose mother later came out as a lesbian and continued to raise the child (without the father living with her, but possibly with a lesbian co-mother) at least three of the 28 children and probably as many as 12 had spent more of their life at the time of the study in a heterosexual than in a lesbian-headed family. Rather than being children from a continuously same-sex parent family, many of the children had experienced more than one form of family structure in their past, often not that of a lesbian parent family. The immediate goal here was to look at the same research data using a different methodological approach, to see if it would confirm or disconfirm Schumm's [1] previous findings. The larger goal was to place the Regnerus [3-5] research into the proper context of the field of same-sex parenting. For example, referring to the Regnerus study, van Eeden-Moorefield & Benson [35] stated that "Only 2 of the 236 participants classified in this way [as children of LGBT parents] were actually raised in same-sex headed households" (p. 181). That is correct, if being raised in a same-sex headed household means having the same same-sex parents from birth to eighteen years of age. By that definition, the question is whether the research of Golombok and her colleagues could be described as involving children "raised in same-sex households" [i.e., from birth to age 18, even the child's current age, if not yet 18 years old]. A larger objective is to remind scholars that the complexities of family structures and their change over family life cycles are common concerns that may highlight limitations of more than a few studies.

Methods

A common problem in elementary algebra texts is the coin problem, where the student is presented with a set of coins of different values and a total value of all the coins; the challenge is to solve the sets of equations to determine how many of each type of coin would be needed to attain the total value given for the coins. Here, using similar algebra, with two equations and two unknowns, we can set up one equation as $A + B = 28$ where A is the number of children for whom the mother transitioned when the child was age 0, presumably younger than six months of age (otherwise, the age would have been rounded up to one) and B is the number of children in the other group of older children. Since the total number of children is 28, then the sum of both groups must equal 28 as well. To maximize the number of children for whom the mother's transition occurred at age 0, we need to

maximize the number for whom the transition occurred as late as possible, that being at 108. Thus, the average age at transition was 49 months and can be represented by the average of $[A(\text{age } 0) + B(108 \text{ months})]/28 = 49$. Since the age of 0 cancels out the A factor, the equation reduces to $108B/28 = 49$ or $108B = 1372$, yielding $B = 12.7$, indicating that no more than 15 of the children could have had a lesbian mother from birth and at least 13 did not, of the 28 children. Another way to look at this is to try to see if we can obtain 16 families from birth (age 0 x 16) and 12 other families. The equation would become $12B = 28(49.1) = 1374.8$. Dividing 1374.8 by 12 = 114.6, a value higher than the largest case value (108) in the study. Either way, it is impossible to have more than 15 families in which the lesbian mothers raised their child from birth or less than 13 families in which the child was conceived in a heterosexual relationship and the mother entered a lesbian family later on.

We can also use the cutoff of 31 months below which a child was guaranteed to have spent at least half of its life in a lesbian household (the youngest age of the children was 62 months), although the estimate will be larger than actual since many of the children were as old as 116 months. Since at least one child was age 0 at the transition, then we obtain a similar equation of $[(A - 1)31 + 108B]/28$ which reduces to $31A - 31 + 108B = 1372$, yielding $B = 13 - .287A$ and substituting into $A + B = 28$ for B , we get $A + 13 - .287A = 28$ which yields $A = 21$, the maximum number of children who might have spent more time in a lesbian family than in a heterosexual family, indicating that at least 7 or more of the 28 children spent more time in a heterosexual family (or some other form) than in a lesbian family. Thus the algebra indicates that no more than 15 of the children could have had a lesbian mother from birth (we know that at least one did, for sure) and that at least 7 or more of the children spent more time in a heterosexual family than in a lesbian family, results that agree with the earlier methods used by Schumm [1]. However, until Golombok and her colleagues release the actual data, we won't know exactly how many of the children or at what age the children transitioned into lesbian families.

Discussion

Golombok et al. [36] is not the only study in which family structures changed over the life of a focal child. Koh, Bos & Gartrell [39] found that of their children raised from birth by two lesbian mothers, over 62% had broken up by the time the child was age 25; 48% had broken up the time the child was ten years old [40]; 56% had broken up by the time the child was age 17 [41]. Allen & Price [42] found that stability rates for same-sex parents were lower than for childfree same-sex couples, with opposite trends for heterosexuals for whom parents had higher stability rates than non-parents. A variety of other studies have found similar patterns [43].

Gates [25] acknowledged that "the research on same-sex parenting and families is remarkably consistent. It shows

that children raised by same-sex couples experience some disadvantages relative to children raised by different-sex married parents. But the disadvantages are largely explained by differences in experiences of family stability between the two groups. Many children being raised by same-sex couples have experienced the breakup of their different-sex parents, resulting in more instability in their lives. That instability has negative consequences. These findings are consistent in research conducted by scholars on both sides of the debate concerning same-sex marriage” (pp. 74-75). Gartrell et al. [40] found that some of the lesbian mothers had as many as six different partners (including at least two men, p. 179) between the child’s birth and age 10. Tasker & Golombok [44] found that 24% of their lesbian mothers had been involved with at least five or more sexual partners over the fifteen years of their longitudinal study of lesbian mothers and their children (Schumm [43] p. 82). However, neither Gartrell et al. [40] nor Tasker & Golombok [44] received the intense criticism as did Regnerus, even though not only were many of their lesbian families unstable but also involved multiple caretaker transitions. Rosenfeld [45] controlled for the number of caretaker transitions when re-analyzing the Regnerus data and found such controls to be very important, even though they have seldom been applied elsewhere.

Conclusion

Some researchers will not provide their data for independent analysis. One earlier reviewer of this report argued that if they don’t provide their data, nothing further can be done. I disagree with such pessimism. Even though one researcher accused of scientific fraud refused to provide much of his data recently, it was still possible to analyze his reported results across six journal articles and demonstrate that much of his report involved mathematically impossible results [46-47]. Even if a scholar refuses to provide their data for independent analysis, I think that the scholarly community has an obligation to do what it can to “see behind the veil” provided by hiding data. While my concerns apply to all research regardless of the topic, if anyone is going to dismiss research as meaningless when family structures for a child have changed before the child turned age 18, then a great deal of research on same-sex parenting – and heterosexual parenting, as well – will have to be “dismissed” or redefined, not just that of Regnerus [3-5]. Instead of being dismissive of research that finds complex family patterns, we need to find better ways of developing family typologies and to use stability/instability (and/or other variables as well) as an intervening variable(s) between demographic characteristics, including initial family structure, and various child outcomes, with statistical tests for both direct and indirect effects through stability and other mediating variables. In other words, what is needed is better theoretical modeling and specific testing of those improved theoretical models. Such approaches are the only way to know which, if any, child outcomes from family structures are completely mediated by intervening factors, such as stability/instability, so we could

confirm Gates’ [25] conclusion that “No research suggests that the gender composition or sexual orientation of parents is a significant factor in negative child outcomes” (p. 75), presumably after controlling for the mediating factors. Furthermore, we may need to develop more reliable typologies of family patterns of change that could be usefully compared. Suppose a family starts out with two lesbian mothers who have a child with a gay father; then one of the lesbian mothers leaves and the lesbian biological mother cohabits with the gay father for two years, then he leaves and the family is a single parent family for ten years; then the mother marries a man for five years but then they divorce. Can we compare that type of family with other types? What can we learn from comparing such various types of families? How does a child respond to such complexity? To which parental caretaker, besides the biological mother, would the child become most attached? How would the child’s attachments change over time to the co-parents? Sometimes I wonder if many family scholars would prefer to pretend that such complexity does not exist, thus alleviating any need to try to find methodologies that will allow us to study that complexity more effectively. Might complexity itself become a variable of study?

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author served on an exploratory committee (only the first meeting of at least two that were held) that later developed the research project, the New Family Structures Study that was funded to Dr. Regnerus. Recently, the author was awarded, in June 2019, a grant (to investigate the quality of selected journal articles) from the University of Texas, led by Dr. Regnerus, for which he has reviewed approximately ten articles. However, the material in this report was prepared independently of that project.

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